

# Onboard

CRUISING • SEAMANSHIP • EQUIPMENT

## SHACKLETON'S 1916 VOYAGE RETRACED

Nearly a century after Shackleton's voyage, six men spent 12 days in a living hell to recreate the "greatest small-boat voyage of all-time"

STORY **STEFFAN MEYRIC HUGHES** PHOTOGRAPHS **COURTESY OF SHACKLETON EPIC**



## “Choosing this trip was harder than being forced into it”

**T**he 800-mile voyage across the Southern Ocean that Shackleton and five of his men made in 1916, to fetch help for the rest of his party stranded on Elephant Island after the sinking of their ship *Endurance*, has been frequently referred to as the greatest small-boat voyage ever made.

Sir Ernest Shackleton himself, traditionally number two to Scott in the canon of British Polar explorers, has become a rare winner in the post-empire trend of historical reinterpretation, a viewpoint often inflected with an undeclared vein of inverse snobbery. So while establishment heroes like Scott and Oates have been shot down in flames of derision or even calumny (Scott as sentimental blunderer and Oates as paedophile) from the comfortable armchairs of hindsight, Shackleton's star shines ever brighter. His paternal leadership that ensured the survival of all 28 of his *Endurance* crew through an epic saga played out in the most hostile place on the planet, led polar historian Sir Raymond Priestley to write in 1974, “For scientific leadership, give me Scott; for swift and efficient travel, Amundsen; but when you are in a hopeless situation, get on your knees and pray for Shackleton.”

No doubt some of the men left stranded in 1916 did pray that Shackleton and his five men would reach salvation – the whaling station at Stromness on the north shore of South Georgia – which of course, they did. This was a time decades before the first OSTAR (1960) and the

first Fastnet (1925), never mind today's global daredevil spectacles like the Velux and Vendée races. In 1916, the Great War waged and, out of radio range, not a soul on earth knew of Shackleton's plight. The idea of sailing a 23ft 1in (7m) ship's lifeboat with a makeshift deck of canvas, 800 miles across the Southern Ocean in winter, must have seemed daunting and surreal.

### INTO THE UNKNOWN

In 2009, Ernest's granddaughter Alexandra Shackleton approached environmental scientist Tim Jarvis to lead a re-enactment of what has become known as the ‘Shackleton Double’ – the treacherous sea voyage followed by a land crossing from the south of the island of South Georgia to Stromness – in vintage kit.

Tim's measured manner and soft Australian accent inspire confidence nearly as much as his past polar expeditions, which include a historically authentic 2007 march across Antarctica in the footsteps of Douglas Mawson's 1912 expedition, to see if Mawson could have survived without eating his companions. Luckily for Jarvis's film crew, he succeeded. “We live in an age where convenience has become the most desirable quality. I don't think everything should be easy,” he told CB at the project's launch at London's In & Out club in September 2012. A long trestle table was laden with coils of natural rope, old packing cases, antique chronometers and cotton haversacks. This lovely stage set was, in fact,



*Previous page:* embayed and inside the rocks on their way to the end of the voyage, the landing site in King Haakon Bay. *Left:* cooking with the same stove as the 1916 voyage, a No 5 Primus, was difficult and decidedly smelly



the actual equipment for the voyage. The build of the new *James Caird*, named the *Alexandra Shackleton* after the voyage's patron, was just as authentic. She was built at the International Boatbuilding Training College normally, as a double-ended whaler in larch on oak, then given three extra planks for topsides, originally an in-situ retrofit by Shackleton's carpenter (and mutineer at one point in the expedition) Harry McNish. The original deck, canvas over a lattice-work of packing case wood and sledge runner, that bore a "strong likeness to stage scenery" (Shackleton), was replaced with a real tongue-and-groove wooden deck covered in canvas. A mast was bolted to the keelson as a hog strengthener, in replication of another of McNish's retrofits in 1916.

Anyone who has read Shackleton's book *South*, or just contemplated sharing a space the size of a small double bed with three other fully clothed, soaking wet men in sub-zero conditions on the Southern Ocean for two gruelling weeks, can imagine that the trip would not be easy. Quite how hard it might be would be impossible to realise, without actually going out there and trying. Early sea trials were not confidence-inspiring; Tim Jarvis reported appallingly claustrophobic conditions, with each man below decks needing to be choreographed limb by limb from the cockpit so they could all lie down at the same time. He reported seasickness from the boat's awful motion and noted how hard it was to navigate or cook. And this was in the Solent.

Nevertheless, on 24 January, the *Alexandra Shackleton* slipped away from Elephant Island, rowing out under her 14ft (4.3m) spruce sweeps to escape the ice and the lee of the land. "We wanted to get as much northing in as early as possible," Aussie navigator Paul Larsen would say later. With him were Tim Jarvis (Anglo-Australian), sailor Nick Bubb (British), bosun Seb Coulthard (British, RN), mountaineer Barry Gray (British, RM) and Ed Wardle (British, cameraman and mountaineer).

#### IN THE SOUTHERN OCEAN

It wasn't long after raising the sails, once out of the lee of land, that the *Alexandra Shackleton* was hit with much of the magic and enormity of the Weddell Sea and the Southern Ocean. The first day featured a close whale sighting, an iceberg encounter, five hours becalmed – and then the seas started rising.

By day three, the boat was racing downwind at up to seven knots, corkscrewing over the 20ft-25ft (6.1m-7.6m) swells, pushed by 50 knots of southerly wind. Thankfully, they were hit with nothing like the freak or 'rogue' wave experienced by Shackleton and crew in 1916, a wave that has entered the hydrographic canon and nautical folklore. Shackleton wrote of it at the time: "What I had seen was not a rift in the clouds, but the white crest of an enormous wave. During 26 years' experience of the ocean in all its moods, I had not encountered a wave so gigantic."



**Top:** arriving on the island of South Georgia.  
**Above:** Barry Gray rows out the miles



# Recreating authenticity

The Shackleton Epic, as it is officially known, was not the first attempt to recreate the 1916 voyage in a replica craft. That accolade goes to German explorer Arved Fuchs, who successfully made the passage in another *James Caird* replica in 2000. The feature that sets Epic apart was the amazing level of authenticity – everything from food and clothing, to the boat itself. In charge of gear and boat modifications (the *Alexandra Shackleton* was supplied by IBTC as an empty shell) was Seb Coulthard RN, voyage bosun. It was Seb’s job to collect all the vintage gear to complete the list of necessary equipment.

Although the boat carried every modern safety device, these, apart from the VHF to relay messages to the support ship, were only used in extremis. From day to day, the men lived much as Shackleton’s crew did in 1916. This meant equipping the boat with oars (a unused set was found in a deep, dusty corner of Portsmouth Historic Dockyard), sails, rigging and much more besides. Seb tracked down Philip Rose-Taylor to act as sailmaker; Philip is one of the last surviving men to have sailed around Cape Horn on a cargo-carrying Tall Ship, and after measuring the *James Caird* in situ at Dulwich College, he made the sails from flax canvas, hand-stitching every part of the ketch-rigged lugger.

While this was going on, the search was on for a list of navigation equipment that included a Heath & Co sextant; Thomas Mercer marine chronometer; E. Dent & Co pattern 182 Admiralty boat compass (gimballed, and alcohol filled), vintage binoculars and an S. Smith & Sons pocket watch. The diaries from Shackleton’s voyage also contained exhaustive lists of food and equipment for Seb to work from.

For the sextant, Seb found a 1954 Sestrel model very similar to the Heath & Co version – “and it was free!” he adds. A boat compass of the exact same model was procured, and was even cracked at the same place in the lens as Shackleton’s. When swung, it showed zero deviation. Seb found a Thomas Mercer chronometer too. This one, a similar model

but from the 1950s, is so accurate that it sat in the offices of the Sydney Harbourmaster and was used until the 1970s to give an accurate time for ship captains to set their chronometers. It lost precisely two seconds a day on land and four at sea.

With the three main instruments dealt with, Seb concentrated on the pocket watch (for budgetary reasons, an Elgin pocket watch from 1916 was substituted for the S. Smith & Sons watch, which fetch thousands on the secondhand market). The Elgin pocket watch worked reliably in Seb’s freezer, his airing cupboard, and on board the ship in the Antarctic.

## VINTAGE CLOTHING

Ed Wardle tracked down the vintage clothing, which comprised woollen jumpers, shirts and underwear, Merino socks and Merino long johns, jackets of tightly-woven cotton, which they waterproofed with boot dubbing, and leather boots with plain leather soles. The jackets were “water-resistant” rather than waterproof, Seb relates, and the wool, contrary to common wisdom, kept him and his crew warm when wet.

For ballast, Seb filled the boat with 1,763lb (800kg) of stone in hessian sacks, tied down with wet manila rope (which tightens when dried). Capsizing tests showed that more was needed to make the boat self-righting. The eventual figure was found to be 2,328lb (1,056kg) – just 88lb (40kg) more than the amount Shackleton estimated would be necessary for the *James Caird*.

In contrast, the modern kit, particularly the AIS, performed very poorly, and Seb wishes to take this chance to warn CB readers that AIS transponders have nothing like the range claimed by the makers. “Four to five miles” on the tin was a few hundred yards in reality. Seb also wishes to emphasise, after tank-testing lifejackets in a simulated storm at the RNLI pool, the importance of crutch straps and a sprayhood. In a simulated Force 5 in a warm pool, they made all the difference.

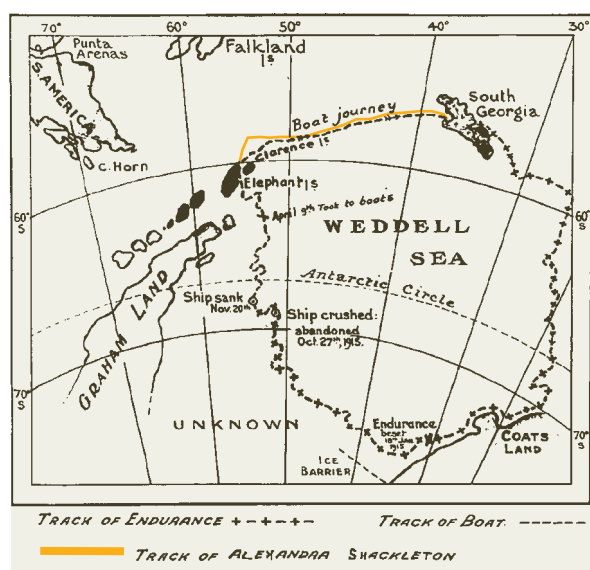




The support boat *Australis* followed at a distance of 20 miles, coming close once a day to take photos, although during the storm, it went into a search pattern for the *Alexandra Shackleton* when all electronic communication failed. The little boat was successfully located just as Seb Coulthard, whose day job is retrofitting Navy helicopters, finished making his repairs, so the relative safety of the mission was once again secured.

Later on in the voyage *Australis* skipper Ben Wallis would note the regularity of 'rogue' waves when, 180 miles off South Georgia, peaks of 26ft (7.9m) would come "popping out of nowhere" in a sea that was averaging just half that. On days with good visibility, *Australis*, 20 miles away, was "a speck in the distance" according to navigator Paul Larsen. Even as a speck, it must have given great psychological succour when compared to the unimaginable exposure known by the Shackleton crew in 1916, alone on a storm-tossed ocean at the bottom of the globe, forgotten by a world at war. Of the windless troughs between the waves, Shackleton wrote: "For a moment the consciousness of the forces arranged against us would be almost overwhelming."

History seldom records, at least in writing, the jokes shared by men in acute discomfort but by day four, Tim's



Clockwise from top left: Philip Rose-Taylor at work on the sails; one of the blocks, dating from 1839; Seb Coulthard; cramped conditions; and the compass, sextant and chronometer  
Left: the courses taken by the *James Caird* and the *Alexandra Shackleton*

diary already stated the jokes had staled. Reading between the lines, life on board must have been indescribable, four men sleeping "like badly folded accordions" as Seb put it, in a space the size of a small double bed, while those on watch were faced with wind-chill temperatures of -10°C



